

2.8.07 - Rahall Pushes for Funding of ARC; Supports New Alternative Energy Initiative

WASHINGTON, DC - Building on his strong record of support for the Appalachian Regional Commission, Rep. Nick Rahall, D-WV, second-ranking Democrat on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, supported legislation Wednesday to reauthorize the program through 2011. The measure, which won the approval of the Committee, would provide \$463 million to the organization, which serves 410 counties, including all of West Virginia and parts of 12 other states.

"For more than a century, Appalachia's natural resources have fueled America's economic engine. Our people's labor has provided this Nation with unparalleled prosperity. It is fitting and proper that part of the Nation's wealth flow back to help Appalachia advance," Rahall said. "These funds will build on more than four decades' vital work by the Appalachian Region Commission."

The Committee also approved an amendment that will allow the ARC to expand its mission even further - approving an initiative that authorizes \$48 million over the next four years in alternative energy grants issued to Appalachian Regional Commission counties.

"West Virginia, with its abundant natural resources, is already at the forefront in the country's efforts to reduce our dependence on foreign oil and it is my hope that this funding will allow the ARC to yet again play a pivotal role in shaping the economic future of our region as we work toward achieving our Nation's energy independence."

This five-year ARC authorization will help southern West Virginia in several ways. In addition to funding the new alternative energy initiative, it will continue to provide needed funds to support rural areas and small communities as they continue to build cutting-edge Internet access, creating high-tech jobs and connecting our students to a vast universe of information. It will also allow the ARC to continue its mission of improving our area's infrastructure.

"From the Appalachian Development Highway System to e-commerce and broadband initiatives, ARC will be better equipped to serve its mission by advocating and partnering with the people of Appalachia to create opportunities for self-sustaining economic development and improved quality of life," Rahall said.

The legislation now goes before the House floor for a vote.

Prior to the Committee's passage of the reauthorization, Rahall submitted the following remarks in support of the ARC:

Remarks of U.S. Rep. Nick J. Rahall, II

T&I Committee Mark-up: Reauthorization of the ARC

February 7, 2007

Mr. Chairman -

Thank you for calling today's mark-up on H.R. 799, the reauthorization of the Appalachian Regional Commission. Every one of the southern West Virginia counties I represent, and indeed the entire State of West Virginia, is encompassed by the Appalachian Regional Commission, and ARC support is critical to our communities' livelihood and well-being.

"A rising tide," Mr. Chairman, President Kennedy told us, "lifts all boats." And so one of President Kennedy's legacies was created in 1965 with a unique mission to serve a unique part of the Nation, the Appalachian region.

Historically, the counties of Appalachia have "faced high levels of poverty and economic distress resulting from geographic isolation and inadequate infrastructure."

It was with these concerns in mind that ARC was created and it is these concerns ARC has been addressing vigorously for the past 40 years.

Take for example the area of transportation, a major focus for ARC. ARC was developed, in part, because of the severe isolation experienced in Appalachia and that in order to develop Appalachia and give its people an opportunity to compete, a system of highways was needed. Enter the Appalachian Development Highway System, which was created to serve the transportation needs of Appalachian residents by assisting in the construction of highways so critically needed by Appalachian communities for economic growth and development.

The ADHS now encompasses over 3,000 miles of Appalachian highways and nearly 85 percent of those roads are complete or under construction. The ADHS is truly a success story for ARC and all of Appalachia. Despite the President's recent budget, which requests eliminating funding for the Appalachian Development Highway System, it is my strong conviction that this program be continued at the agreed upon level set forth in SAFETEA-LU.

If Members review a recent report, entitled, The Potential for an Uncontrolled Mass Evacuation of the DC Metro Area Following a Terrorist Attack: A report of Survey Findings, by West Virginia University, it becomes readily clear that the ARC's development highways will critically serve another national purpose in times of "mass spontaneous evacuations," particularly from here, Mr. Chairman, our Nation's Capital. This may surprise many, but about 83% of the people here plan on probably leaving, and 88% of those plan on leaving by car.

Without doubt Appalachia, West Virginia, in particular, must be ready to handle such future fateful events. The ARC can be a catalyst in preparing for such an eventuality, but they do not have the resources, nor the mandate to fulfill this

function. I hope this lone call, will signal, first the need, and secondly the will, of this Member of Congress, that we need full partners in the federal government to work with ARC and other appropriate agencies to plan for evacuations now rather than some distant day.

Before I leave this subject of transportation and the critical value of rural America's transportation network to our urban brothers and sisters, it is my sincere hope that rural America's voice will be loud and clear when it comes to funding schemes that would punish rural commuters and citizens who are forced by geography to drive long distances each day to and from their employment. It is an issue critical to the completion and maintenance of ARC development highways network.

And while a major focus of ARC remains on highways and Appalachian transportation infrastructure, as the times have changed so has ARC.

As much of the United States has been able to take advantage of the technological boom of the late 20th and early 21st Centuries, Appalachia once again is in danger of being left behind and unable to compete in the global marketplace.

In the most recent FCC data on high-speed connections for Internet access, released on January 31, 2007, you can track the Appalachian mountain range by just how spotty the provider coverage is on the FCC's provider map. In fact, in West Virginia is significantly below the average in broadband use nationwide.

Again, ARC is there to offer significant support, bringing broadband access to our communities, which is essential to leveling the playing field and giving our communities an opportunity to compete. Schools, businesses, local governments and individual homes all have benefited from ARC involvement in the expansion of broadband access in Appalachia, and continue to do so.

I have been working with ARC, private telecommunications companies and local economic development leaders to bring broadband technology into southern West Virginia. For example, through the E-commerce training initiatives being offered by ARC and others we are working to connect local small businesses to broadband, opening doors to internet sales and services that just weren't there a couple of years ago.

It is ARC's ability to serve its mission by adapting its actions to fit the times that makes ARC such an invaluable resource to Appalachia and the Nation. From the Appalachian Development Highway System to the E-commerce and broadband initiatives, ARC continues to serve its mission by advocating for and partnering with the people of Appalachia to create opportunities for self-sustaining economic development and improved quality of life.

I am also glad to see the integrity of ARC programs kept in tact by disallowing the use of earmarks in this legislation. I believe adoption of this provision is critical and will benefit all ARC member-states and the long-term viability of ARC itself.

I applaud the efforts of Federal Co-Chair Anne Pope who, as a native daughter of Appalachia, executes so well the mission of ARC in each of Appalachia's communities. I have said this before and am happy to do so again on the record, Anne is one of the finest Federal Co-Chairs to ever serve the people of Appalachia and I look forward to our continued strong relationship serving the needs of southern West Virginians, together.

I strongly support ARC, its mission and the incredibly successful initiatives it has undertaken to better the lives of the people of Appalachia and West Virginia.